

Dimensions of Hegemony

Empire as a Way of Life, by William Appleman Williams.
New York: Oxford University Press, 1980. Pp. xiv, 226.
\$14.95.

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A recent review of the new book by revisionist historian William Appleman Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life*,¹ asserts in criticism, "Let us face it, every great nation became great because of its conquests, often at the expense of other peoples. This fact must be recognized, but it does not amount to an enduring trait of national character."² That reviewer thus draws clearly the battle lines on this highly controversial book, as on Williams' previous work as well. On one side are those who do not try to conceal what Williams would call imperial arrogance--the identification of greatness with conquest, the association between civilization and conqueror, and the inevitability of these pairings ("this fact must be recognized"). To them, empire is a small part of America's past, and Williams' discursive, homely, and sometimes even unscholarly style does not encourage them to reassess. On the other side are those like Williams who see empire as the fundamental and defining concern of American statesmen since the early eighteenth century.

Williams' argument is important, and it is all-encompassing. That the reviewer cited above found it necessary to write a vitriolic and *ad hominem* attack on the book suggests the extent of the emotion that Williams' argument arouses and of the criticism that the book will elicit. Thus, whatever side one chooses, it is essential to analyze separately the argument Williams presents, the reasons for the criticism, and the wider implications of the message he wants to communicate.

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1. W.A. Williams, *Empire as a Way of Life* (1980) [hereinafter cited by page number only].

2. Lukacs, Book Review, *The New Republic*, Oct. 11, 1980, at 31.

The story begins in England in the sixteenth century with the knighting of a pirate--Drake--by Elizabeth I. It continues with Cromwell and Locke, to the shores of the New World and the merciless destruction of generous hosts, the First Americans. Whether with guns, disease, or trade for profit, Africans and successive settlements of Native Americans became victims. A list of interventions on foreign territory, excluding declared wars, accompanies most chapters; a small sample of the long list illustrates Williams' point. 1787-1829: The Dominican Republic, ("From the halls of Montezuma to the shores of Tripoli") Mexico, West and East Florida, the Marquesas Islands, the Caribbean, Algiers, Oregon, Africa, Cuba, Puerto Rico, Greece. 1829-1898: The Falkland Islands, Sumatra, Argentina, Peru, the Fiji Islands, Samoa, Drummond Island, Smyrna, Turkey, Joahanna Island, Nicaragua, Japan, Ryukyu and Bonin Islands, China, Uruguay, Panama, Paraguay, Angola, Colombia, Formosa, the Hawaiian Islands, Korea, Egypt, Haiti, the Bering Sea, Chile, Brazil. 1898-1920: the Philippine Islands, Honduras, Syria. 1920-1941: Siberia, Guatemala, Soviet Russia, Costa Rica, Newfoundland, Bermuda, St. Lucia, Bahamas, Jamaica, Antigua, Trinidad, British Guiana, Greenland, Dutch Guiana, Iceland, Germany.

Williams, however, is not interested in the details of those interventions, and his argument requires that they merely be mentioned. His attention is rather on the attitudes that led to such interventions, and he aims to leave the impression that the imperial mind and its imperial policies are the core around which American domestic and foreign policy has been built since the very beginning. Long before Karl Marx or V. I. Lenin, the early Americans saw economic growth as synonymous with empire. That expansion served both state and economy. Economic growth required commerce and trade. "Riches," Williams quotes John Locke as saying, "do not consist in having more Gold and Silver, but in having more in proportion than the rest of the World, or than our Neighbours."³

Not only prosperity but freedom was at stake. The "imperial republicanism" of Samuel and John Adams, of Madison, and of Jefferson suggests a revision in the philosophy of early liberalism. In American hands, the source of freedom and stability would not be found in a strong authority or in pluralism, but in empire. Thus James Madison, in 1787, writes to Thomas Jefferson, "This form of government [the Constitution], in order to effect

3. P. 15.

its purposes, must operate not within a small but an extensive sphere."⁴ Jefferson concurs, and in his second inaugural address claims, "[T]he larger our association the less it will be shaken by local passions."⁵ Furthermore, should the imperial strategy be doubted, one need only be reminded of the duties of civilizing powers. Racism, though an essential ingredient of "empire as a way of life," was not the cause but the justification--a psychological gloss on the harsh reality of empire. Winthrop's "City upon a Hill,"⁶ assisted by missionaries and marines, would be the hope, as John Adams put it, of the "slavish part of mankind."⁷

By the twentieth century this trinity of stable freedom, prosperity, and racism had taken on a new look but not a new content: the Big Stick (Roosevelt), Dollar Diplomacy (Taft), and Saving the World (Wilson). In every case the original argument worked: through empire we could have both guns and butter, we could "have our cake and eat it, too," we had grown "accustomed to winning without paying any significant costs."⁸ And always, as Williams, quoting Carl Becker, observes, "people who open and settle the frontiers, 'must be always transforming the world into their ideal of it.'"⁹

The imperial mind always prevailed, but it did have its critics; and Williams' list of heroes and villains may strike a raw nerve in many who otherwise would be undisturbed by the argument itself. The villains are many, from Benjamin Franklin, Sam Adams, Madison, Jefferson, and Jackson to F.D.R., Truman, Acheson, Kennedy, and Kissinger. The tragic characters are Lincoln, who struck a Faustian bargain--to fight the evil of slavery with the evil of empire; and Lyndon Johnson, who tried to resolve the contradiction of American history--"empire as a way ... of avoiding the fundamental challenge of creating a humane and equitable community or culture"¹⁰--by pursuing both imperialism abroad and equity at home. Indeed, Johnson's tragedy is a product of Lincoln's sin: "Lincoln won the Civil War, but his Faustian bargain left us with southerners doing their cotton-picking best to catch up

4. P. 35.

5. P. 61.

6. P. 52.

7. P. 39.

8. P. 176.

9. P. 99.

10. P. 96.

with northerners who were being tough and successful."¹¹ Finally, the heroes are Hoover and Eisenhower. Their defeats, writes Williams, "led many observers ... to conclude that those men were naive, misguided, or simply mistaken; and on those grounds to dismiss them as irrelevant, even to charge them with responsibility for America's subsequent troubles."¹² How then, one wonders, did Carter, a Navy man and a Southerner, fall victim to these charges? Williams' account of developments in the meantime--the farmers' role, the deliberate creation of dependencies such as Canada, disarmament, the shift to oil, the New Deal, National Security Council Document No. 68,¹³ Korea, and Cuba--relates a pattern that continues and leads him in conclusion to ask: Does democracy need empire?

Moved by the frightening dangers that this question has come to imply in a nuclear age and no doubt impatient with the unwillingness of the majority to listen to those who answer "no," Williams has responded with a simultaneously powerful and petulant book. The difficulty is that it can be read either way, as powerful or as petulant. The audience he does not need to reach will read it as powerful, persuasive, engrossing, and horrifying. They will find themselves confirmed. The audience he needs to reach will focus on its vulnerabilities: the insipid and pedantic introduction, the missing references, the sloppy editing, the deliberately anti-scholarly and occasionally personalizing style. This second, resistant audience can easily find reasons not to listen. One can only speculate on why Williams chose this style. Is it the proverbial cowardice of the American radical who succumbs to exasperation where a more committed revolutionary would persist? Is it the publishing industry looking for a quick buck that goads distinguished "names" into exposing their agonies in print for a mass market?¹⁴ Is it the hidden conservatism, even puritanism, of American intellectuals that makes them squirm at an historian's outburst of justifiable passion when "speaking his mind"?

11. P. 183. C. Vann Woodward makes a similar assessment in his review of Merle Miller's *Lyndon: An Oral Biography*. See C.V. Woodward, Book Review, *The New Republic*, Nov. 1, 1980, at 29-31.

12. P. 145.

13. See pp. 187-91.

14. One thinks of Robert Dahl's *After the Revolution?* (1970) in the same way.

To focus on the failings of Williams' style, however, is not necessarily to destroy his thesis. Indeed, he is not alone in his argument. For example, his attempt to draw attention to the intellectual origins of empire reminds one of A. O. Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before Its Triumph*¹⁵ and of Edmund S. Morgan's *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia*.¹⁶ The closer one gets to the present, the longer becomes the list of historians with like-minded treatises. Why, then, will the book be so criticized? Partly, it is the frontal attack. As Williams' opening lines warn, "The words *empire* and *imperialism* enjoy no easy hospitality in the minds and hearts of most contemporary Americans."¹⁷ For example, it is easy to talk about a persistent race "problem" in the United States; it is another thing to call ourselves racists. Partly, it is a challenge to those liberals who tended to see the demoralization after the Vietnam defeat, the consequences of feelings of collective guilt after a long age of innocence, as more dangerous than the causes of the war itself. Williams seems to be stirring up trouble to those who value stability. And partly, it may even be that we need to see the victims as scapegoats--OPEC, immigrants, Third World barbarians--to withstand a recession that shows no early signs of relief. Thus, although it is easy to understand why Williams' book will elicit a critical and often unsympathetic response, this criticism should not blind us to the wider implications of Williams' arguments. At a time when racist and anti-semitic movements on the right are enjoying a renaissance, when social legislation to aid the victims of internal imperialism is being reduced, when promises of rearmament and jingoism win an election and once again threaten victims of the external empire, when the program of the new First Lady is to re-construct Washington as a "shining white City on the Hill," surely we do ourselves a disservice in dismissing Williams out of hand.

At the very least, Williams provides an interpretation, historically grounded, for a number of contemporary problems. For example, difficulties in relations between the United States and its European allies may well stem from the American attitude that Williams describes. This

15. A. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests* (1977).

16. E. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom* (1975).

17. P. viii.

attitude was poignantly obvious in the simultaneous proclamation in 1823 of the Monroe Doctrine and of the right "to support Greek revolutionaries,"¹⁸ but it is a position that hardly suits present circumstances. As Andrew Shonfield warned an American audience, former Secretary of State Kissinger's complaint that the European Community presents the United States with *faits accomplis* rather than opportunities for prior consultation had a remedy that was a "severe dilemma for the United States."¹⁹ He continued:

What is being asked, quite justifiably, of the European Community is in effect that it should concede to its main ally the right to be involved in its decision-making at the pre-legislative stage. For its external policies are, as is natural, connected often in intimate ways with all manner of bargains struck and arguments conducted on subjects of domestic interest. It is not possible for an outsider to be involved in one and excluded from the other. The question would then arise whether the United States would be prepared to grant the representatives of the European Community a reciprocal right of pre-legislative consultation on Congressional business which they believed might in some way affect them.... [I]t is by no means impossible that the Europeans ... would be prepared to extend what I call the "Community method" of conducting politics to Transatlantic relations. This means above all the right of mutual intervention in one another's domestic affairs. The European nations have shown since the war that they are ready to abate their notions of sovereign dignity sufficiently to accommodate the new mode of conducting international relations. The United States by contrast has not yet encountered the pressures that have led others to accept the radical adaptation of national institutions required for that end.²⁰

A second example that Williams helps clarify is the persistent inability of the United States to provide a

18. P. 73.

19. A. Shonfield, *Europe: Journey to an Unknown Destination* 6 (1974).

20. *Id.* at 6-7.

level of general welfare commensurate with its great wealth. Explanations that point to the size of the defense budget, to the dominance by business and the reliance on private, market solutions, and to the socioeconomic status of elected officials at all levels seem adequate; but these are different aspects of the same problem. Governmental policy, or lack thereof, responds to the definition of conflicts within a society; a strong socialist movement, for example, succeeds in making class issues--income redistribution, transfer payments, health care, housing--important because it divides the electorate by a class cleavage. In the United States, time and again, elections are won by creating a conflict between the American population and the rest of the world, not by dividing them internally. As Williams puts it, "One of the major characteristics of an imperial way of life is its tendency to define domestic problems and difficulties, and to explain the failure to resolve them, in terms of external developments."²¹ From Williams' perspective, it is not surprising that Philip Converse continued to find a major inconsistency in the American public's attitudes on domestic policy and those on foreign policy,²² nor is it surprising that Americans say they have no choice between presidential candidates. There is, however, a tragedy in the consequences.

At the very most, Williams may point in the direction of solutions, to the endangered world order as well as to domestic injustices. The first step is to recognize the cause. If we learn to recognize not only that our prosperity is the basis of our democracy²³ but also that the empire is the basis of our prosperity, we might be less cavalier in our management of the international monetary order²⁴ or in our flirtation with tariffs. We might even see that taking an active part in restructuring the international economic order in a more equitable direction would give us some control over the consequences, control that would not be possible with the collapse of the international monetary system. If we learn to recognize our

21. P. 149.

22. See Converse, *The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics*, in *Ideology and Discontent* 206 (D. Apter ed. 1964); Converse, *Attitudes and Non-Attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue*, in *The Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems* (E. Tufte ed. 1970). But see Nie, *Mass Belief Systems Revisited: Political Change and Attitude Structure*, 36 J. Pol. 540 (1974) (arguing that earlier survey findings reflected transient phenomena not intrinsic to the nature of mass publics).

23. As David Potter showed so well in *People of Plenty* (1954).

24. See Abdalla, *The Inadequacy and Loss of Legitimacy of the International Monetary Fund*, [1980:2] *Development Dialogue* 25.

imperial history, we might be more receptive to Third World perspectives and thus regain influence we have abdicated to a Soviet Union that is receptive. If we learn to recognize the lesson of Britain--the prolonged damage to one's domestic economy that results from an insistence on maintaining one's world power status at all costs²⁵ and the ultimately destabilizing consequences of "internal colonialism"²⁶--we might again have control over events before it is too late. As Williams says, perhaps not too melodramatically, "Assume the worst. Empire as a way of life will lead to nuclear death. Community as a way of life will lead for a time to less than is necessary. Some of us will die. But how one dies is terribly important. It speaks to the truth of how we have lived."²⁷

The second step would be to take action. As Williams poses it, we must ask ourselves the question, "Is the idea and reality of America possible without empire?"²⁸ Perhaps we can return to where the story began, with Elizabeth I; that is to say, this time to the colonization of Ireland with Protestants. The attempt to find some peaceful solution to that terrible conflict founders today, Brian Barry shows,²⁹ on the unwillingness of the Protestants to compromise. Though in control in Northern Ireland, they perceive themselves to be a beleaguered minority within the island's population. They act defensively, therefore, at the same time that they are in control. They are in control because they managed to define the political cleavage in Northern Ireland (through a change in the electoral law in 1929) as a communal conflict: as Barry describes it, "Every general election would thus be simply a plebiscite on the issue of the Border: there would be no way in which a voter could simultaneously vote for or against partition and for or against alternative socio-economic policies that might cut across the Protestant-Catholic division."³⁰ The only solution to the current conflict, according to

25. See Blank, *Britain: The Politics of Foreign Economic Policy, the Domestic Economy, and the Problem of Pluralistic Stagnation*, in *Between Power and Plenty* (P. Katzenstein ed. 1978).

26. M. Hechter, *Internal Colonialism* (1975).

27. P. 213.

28. P. 211.

29. Barry, *The Consociational Model and Its Dangers*, 3 *European J. Political Research* 393-412 (1975).

30. *Id.* at 399.

Barry, is

...a recognition by both sides that some sort of accommodation has to be reached so as to avoid an indefinite continuation (probably of steadily increasing intensity) in the present communal violence and the disruption of ordinary life, this could be done without any special political arrangements simply by the Protestant majority making conciliatory moves and the Catholic minority responding. Unfortunately, however, many Protestants probably believe that total victory can be achieved at an acceptable cost. So long as they continue to believe this (and it is not obviously an irrational belief) there can be no very bright prospect of accommodation in Northern Ireland.³¹

If Williams is right, the United States has for a very long time been the "Protestants" in the world; and until we believe that we must make the conciliatory moves, there is no more hope for justice or order in that context than there is in Northern Ireland.

31. *Id.* at 411.

